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Female autonomy and women's welfare: An introduction

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Gender equality and female empowerment are important goals in themselves. They are also potential means to achieving desirable outcomes in domains related to fertility, child health, education, and poverty alleviation (e.g., Duflo, 2003; Lundberg, Pollak, & Wales, 1997; World Bank, 2012). This has led to women's empowerment being a key policy goal in recent decades, especially since the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979.¹ In 2015, gender equality was listed as Goal 5 in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.² There is as well a consensus that outcomes for women have improved considerably during recent decades especially in terms of educational attainment, fertility, life expectancy, and labor force participation (Heath & Jayachandran, 2018). However, significant gender gaps remain, and women fall behind in the labor market, continue to be underrepresented in the political arena, have weaker legal rights, and face overt discrimination (Duflo, 2012; World Bank, 2012). Further, these gender gaps and gender-biased attitudes are more prevalent in low-income countries.

A sizable disadvantage and discrimination that women and girls face arises within their households. In fact, this inequality faced by girls within their households from an early age contributes to worse later-life outcomes for them. Evidence from India and China points towards a preference for sons leading to skewed sex ratios and “missing women,” lower spending on daughters, practices related to dowry, and a general lack of decision-making power in the hands of women (Anderson, 2007; Jayachandran, 2015). Female genital mutilation practised in parts of Africa and the Middle East has affected at least 200 million young girls (UNICEF, 2016). Across most developing countries, property and inheritance rights are stacked in favor of males (Hallward-Driemeier, Hasan, & Bogdana Rusu, 2013) and women are frequent targets of domestic violence.

Acknowledging the potential gains that could accrue from increased female autonomy, we need a better understanding of how changes in local contexts and environments alter women's autonomy, welfare, and decision-making. While we know from existing literature that improved labor market

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opportunities for women as well as political gender quotas have led to improvements in a host of outcomes such as education, work, marriage, and aspirations (e.g., Beaman, Chattopadhyay, Duflo, Pande, & Topalova, 2012; Bhalotra, Clarke, Gomes, & Venkataramani, 2018; Heath & Mobarak, 2015; Jensen, 2012; Pande & Ford, 2011), there is room to learn more about possible empowerment effects arising from different types of natural or policy-driven changes.

The collection of articles in this symposium speaks to the issue of female autonomy and women's welfare within households, making use of rich data from a variety of developing countries including Brazil, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, India, Indonesia, Senegal, Tanzania, and Zambia. These papers emanate from the UNU-WIDER project "Gender and Development."

Carney and Carney (2018) analyze the impacts of a gender-biased technology change, namely adoption of conservation farming, on female labor supply, household expenditure patterns, and children's health and education in Zambia. They find that the expansion of conservation farming techniques increased female labor hours vis-à-vis male labor hours and shifted expenditures in favor of items reflecting the preferences of women such as education investments and clothing expenditures. While there exists evidence on interventions providing women with access to capital and training (for a overview, see Buvinic & Furst-Nichols, 2016), we know relatively little about the implications of agricultural technology adoption for farming households from a gender perspective, especially considering the high level of engagement of women in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa.³ This paper shows that embedding gender into agricultural interventions can redress gender imbalances in decision-making in households (Doss [2018] provides a nuanced discussion of women and agricultural productivity).

Two papers in this symposium examine the effectiveness of greater female representation in the spheres of politics and private enterprises. More than half the countries in the world have implemented some type of political quota for women with the idea being that it would level the playing field for female candidates and that more women in power will better represent the preferences of women. Similarly, laws requiring representation of women on corporate boards have gained ground since Norway first implemented it in the early 2000s (for reviews, see Duflo, 2005, Pande & Ford, 2011). First, Castilla (2018) examines the effects of mandated political representation for women in India—that required one-third of local political seats to be reserved for women—on the likelihood of child marriage and age at marriage. Exploiting exogenous variation in election timing across states and comparing women who were married at the time of the first election with those who were unmarried, Castilla finds that exposure to local female leaders led to a decline in the probability of child marriage and increased the age at marriage. Akin to Beaman et al. (2012), she attributes this finding to role model effects leading to changes in gender and cultural norms. This paper adds to a nascent literature examining effects of the policy in reference on individual-level outcomes.

Second, La Mattina, Picone, Ahoure, and Kimou (2018) provide evidence from developing countries on the role that female representation in senior management in private enterprises plays in determining the wages and job satisfaction of female employees. Using a rich linked employer–employee dataset for firms in Cameroon, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire, they document findings consistent with the "queen bee syndrome" wherein relative outcomes of female employees are worse under female CEOs. However, they find that in firms where female managers are also owners, there is no gender wage gap, indicating that sufficient autonomy needs to be provided to female managers to improve the status of female employees. That greater representation of females in corporate management is not unequivocally benefiting the labor market outcomes of female employees has also been documented in developed country contexts (Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney, 2018).⁴

Migration can have effects on intra-household dynamics in both sending and hosting areas. Moreover, the evidence on gender-specific impacts of migration in host communities is based on data from developed countries. Ruiz and Vargas-Silva (2018) contribute to this literature by studying the impacts of large and unexpected refugee inflows from Rwanda and Burundi on the intra-household allocation of tasks among the host population in Kagera in neighbouring Tanzania. Using distance of households to exogenously placed refugee camps as a proxy for a migration shock, they find that the refugee shock resulted in native women being more likely to engage in household chores and less likely to undertake outside employment as compared with men, with the effects being driven by less educated women. This indicates a generally accepted insight that education matters for female autonomy and women's welfare.

Economic shocks lead households to develop and rely on coping mechanisms to smoothen consumption. Such coping mechanisms can affect males and females differently (Ferreira & Schady, 2009). Dong (2018) studies the 1998 Asian financial crisis in Indonesia, where the crisis had the hardest impact on GDP. Using household-level data on couples from the Indonesia Family and Life Survey, she finds that in districts that were more severely affected by the crisis, there was an increase in female employment and a decrease in women's business asset holding owing to sell-off, especially in urban areas. Suggestive evidence shows that being a beneficiary of the social safety net programme mitigates the negative impacts on women's assets. This paper also provides an example of detailed gender-disaggregated data on asset ownership.⁵

In the final paper, Codazzi, Pero and Sant'Anna (2018) assess the importance of gender identity norms within marriages for women's labor supply decisions in Brazil. They uncover a negative relationship between female labor force participation and the probability that a woman earns more than her husband. Further, as the probability of a woman earning more than her husband increases, at the intensive margin, there is a decline in hours worked and an increase in the gap between potential and actual wages. Notably, given that informality characterizes much of the Brazilian labor market, the authors find participation in the informal sector to be positively correlated with the probability of a woman earning more than her husband.

Together, the papers in this symposium shed light on the importance of extra-household factors for intra-household bargaining and welfare of women. Better policy and policy implementation can support in achieving the goal of gender equity. However, as is evident, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to bring women to parity in heterogeneous contexts. This implies that continued policy research adapted to specific country contexts and with impact remains a high priority. While much has been achieved, the glass is far from "half full" when it comes to gender equality and female empowerment.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.unf.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>

² Considerable development assistance has been devoted to promoting gender equality. See Berlin, Bonnier, and Olofsgard (2017) and Grown, Addison, and Tarp (2016) for discussions and analyses.

³ Arndt and Tarp (2000) find that technological improvements in cassava production in Mozambique freed up labor time for women allowing them the possibility to allocate more time to leisure or other market-oriented activities.

⁴ Rand and Tarp (2011) find that the share of female owners positively affects the provision of fringe benefits to employees in Vietnamese SMEs.

⁵ For an overview of best practices on collecting gender-disaggregated data on ownership and control of assets, see Doss, Kieran, and Kilic (2017).

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